

Headline	Making Inroads Into New Agriculture		
Date	21. Feb 2008	Language	ENGLISH
Media Title	New Straits Times	Page No	48,49
Section	Business Times	Article Size	1161 cm2
Circulation	127668	Frequency	Daily
Readership	446838	Color	Full Color



"YOU don't need a 4x4. A regular sedan is fine. The road into Felda Nitar 2 has been tarred over," Mahizan Mahbob gave the assurance over the phone.

He was right. It was a smooth ride — smoother than on some highways in the federal capital — into Felda Nitar 2, some 25km from Mersing town.

Felda Nitar 2 is the base for De Nita Trading, Mahizan's budding dragonfruit empire.

The tarred road, built by the government two years ago, is supposed to be a short cut to Endau. Though only half complete, it has proved a great convenience to the dragonfruit farmers from around Mersing, and as far away as Batu Pahat, who send their produce to Mahizan's farm, which also doubles up as a processing centre.

A rather new food crop in Malaysia, the dragonfruit has turned out to be a commercial success, judging from the speed Mahizan has been expanding his farm.

He started out with only 0.8ha. A year later, he had expanded it to 2.8ha, then 8ha, and now, he has 60.8ha. By mid-year, he will have another 40.5ha. He is in the midst of clearing the land in Raub, Pahang.

Not only that, he is also making a killing by processing the fruit into bottled products for export to Brunei, the Philippines and Singapore.

"The dragonfruit is very versatile. It can be turned into many products, such as cordials, jams, nata de coco and halwa (sweet fruit preserve).

"I'm currently experimenting with dragonfruit-flavoured coffee. I'm having trouble meeting local demand, let alone the overseas market," Mahizan said, eyes twinkling.

That is why he is encouraging his field hands and neighbouring Felda settlers to take up dragonfruit farming and providing them with the necessary training and support services — from the cuttings and fertilisers to distribution and marketing — to enhance his supply network.

Universiti Putra Malaysia has also enlisted his help to mentor the agricultural graduates registered with its Centre for Extension, Entrepreneurship and Professional Advancement on cultivating dragonfruit.

Things were far from rosy when Mahizan started out in 2002. Then a military intelligence officer, he opted out of the force after 20 years of service to become a farmer, stunning his close friends and family.

"My family called me stupid. I was a major and had my own staff car and a driver. I even had a driver to ferry my children to school," the 44-year-old admitted. "But I wanted to be my own boss and saw the potential in commercial farming of dragonfruit."

It was an uphill road for the former army man. He may be the son-in-law of a Felda settler, but he had no background nor experience in agriculture. He sought help from the agricultural departments, but received none.

"I spent over RM250,000 on research and development alone. To date, I have spent more than RM650,000. Luckily, I was in partnership with seven others. We supported each other," said Mahizan.

They scoured the Internet for information and performed their own experiments to learn how best to cultivate the crop, sharing their knowledge with each other. It took two years, but the novices finally had something of value to show the agricultural authorities.

Making inroads into new agriculture

For over 20 years, agriculture was largely neglected in favour of industrialisation. Under the Ninth Malaysia Plan, the government pledged to correct the imbalance and injected a whopping RM11.4 billion to turn farming into serious business, focusing on building agro-entrepreneurs. DEBRA CHONG checks out the extent of this revolution by zooming in on a dragonfruit farm in Mersing, Johor.



VERSATILE: Dragonfruit jam and cordial produced by Mahizan's company, De Nita Trading.

In 2005, the government agencies finally paid attention and started providing him with material and financial aid.

"I got 20 bags of fertiliser, each weighing 50kg, pesticides and wheelbarrows, and 3,000 concrete poles (needed to prop up the creeper cacti) from Mardi (Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute).

"Fama (Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority) sponsored a freezer that can store 700kg to 800kg of fruit even though there is no electricity supply to my farm," he added wryly.

"Risda (Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority) got in touch to initiate a project to help the hardcore poor smallholders increase their income. They wanted to invest in my dragonfruit project and gave me RM40,000 (RM10,000 per person), and I put in another RM10,000 so I could rent two acres (0.8ha) of land. One acre cost RM25,000. In 2006, they added three more people, so I topped up some more for another two acres."

It all went well until the big flood at the end of the year. Mahizan lost 2.4ha. Last year, he lost 1.6ha. Although the federal government approved RM4.7 million to be distributed immediately to affected farmers to enable them to revive their crops, the retired major claimed to have

received only RM2,000 compensation.

"It was more like sympathy money. I estimate my losses at RM120,000. It took me another RM40,000 to rehabilitate the land to be farm-worthy again, but I'm not complaining," said Mahizan.

He sees it as the government's subtle way to wean the farming community off subsidies and be more independent.

"We have to change our mentality. We should not spoil the rakyat with subsidies," he stressed.

"The government is moving in the right direction by focusing on agricultural entrepreneurship. To be a successful entrepreneur, you must start from the ground.

You must know how to cultivate, market and distribute your own products. You must have a target and not be easily satisfied with what you have."

At the same time, he feels there is room for the government's methods to be improved.

"Like when I first started out. I really needed help, but encountered a lot of bureaucracy in getting aid. They've done a great job to come this far. It just needs some more time (for the policies to be successful)."

The government's new policies, like the tarred road outside Mahizan's farm, will need more work to ensure a smoother process in reaping the fruit of labour.



“
To be a successful entrepreneur, you must start from the ground. You must know how to cultivate, market and distribute your own products. You must have a target and not be easily satisfied with what you have.

Mahizan Mahbob
Agro-entrepreneur

”